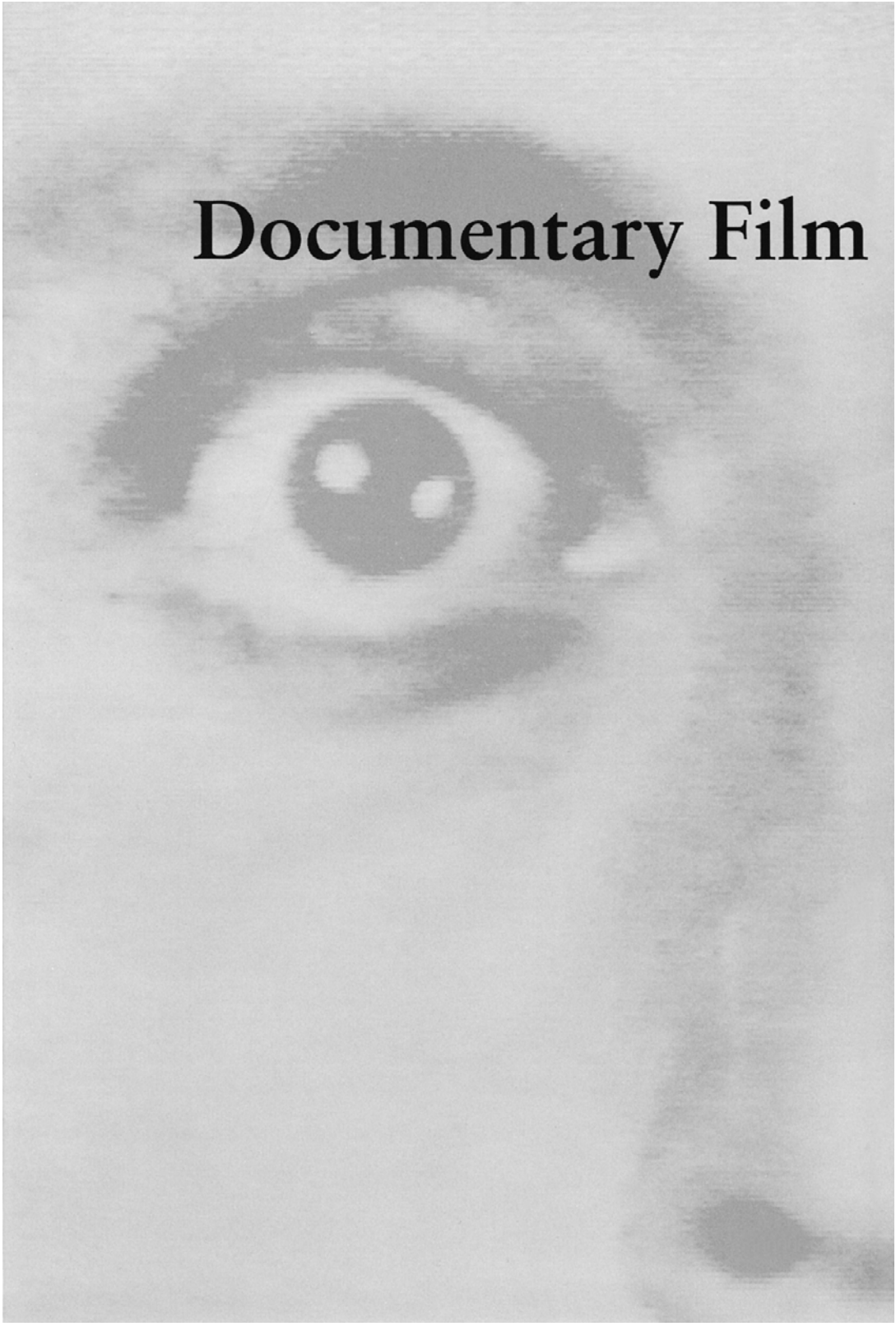
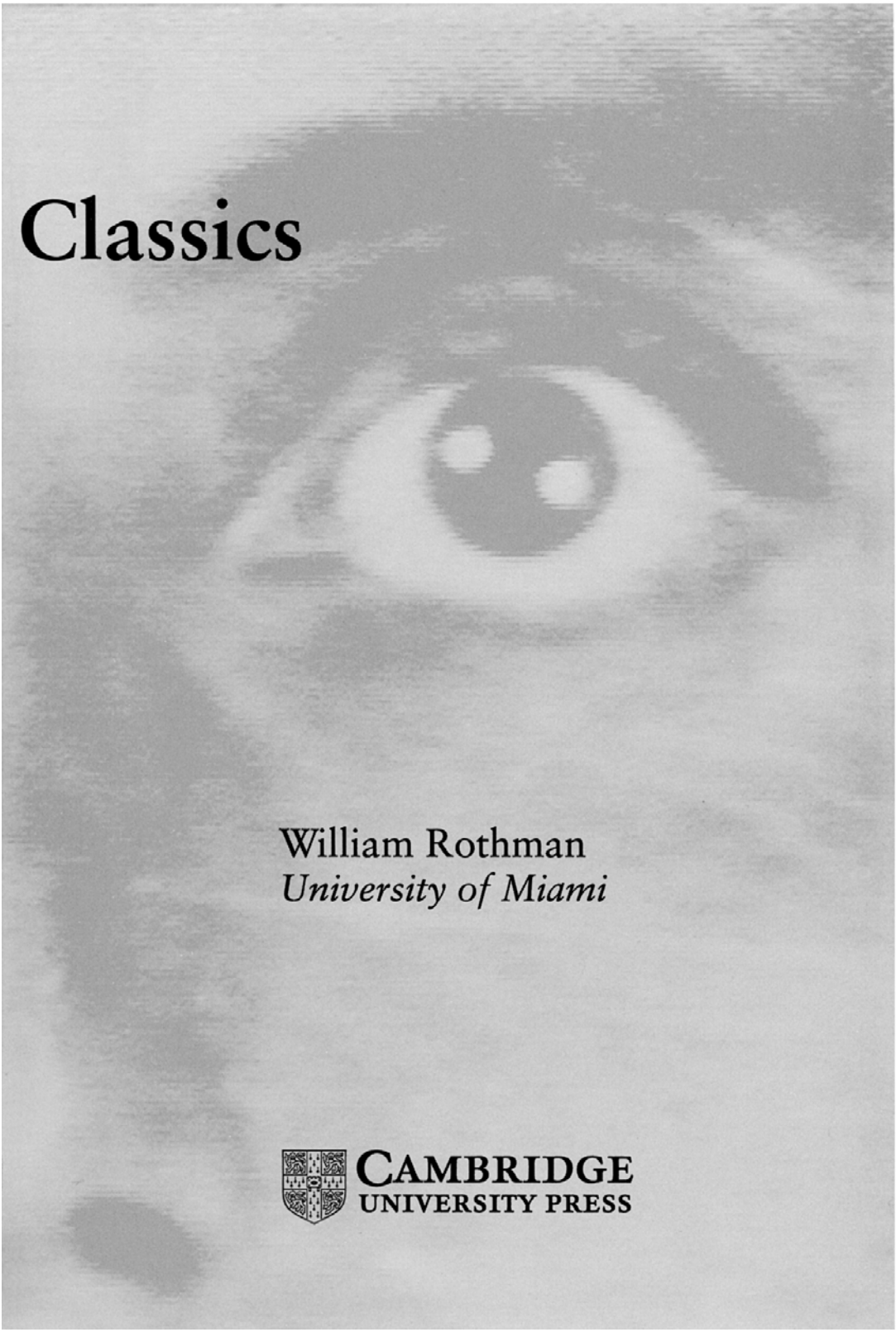
Documentary Film Classics offers close readings of a number of major documentaries, including *Nanook of the North*, *Land without Bread*, *Night and Fog*, *Chronicle of a Summer*, *A Happy Mother's Day*, and *Don't Look Back*. William Rothman analyzes the philosophical and historical issues and themes implicit in these works. Designed to guide film students through the "texts" of films that span the history of the doumentary film movement, his readings also focus on the achievements of these works as films per se. This book is both an original contribution to the field of film studies and also suitable for use as a text for college-level courses on documentary film and broader film history courses.

Documentary Film Classics





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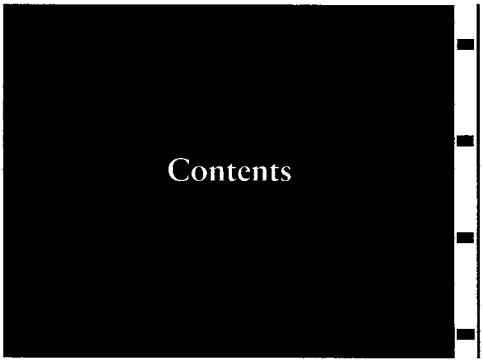

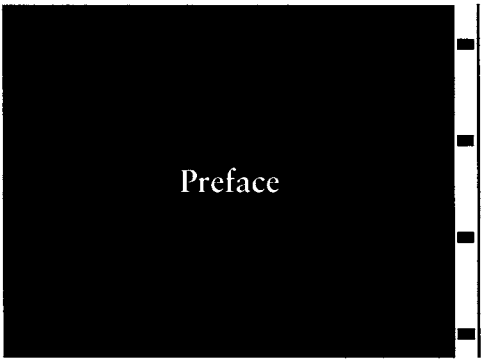

Documentary Film Classics consists primarily of close readings of a number of major landmarks of documentary film: Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1921), Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* (1932), Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), Jean Rouch's and Edgar Morin's *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), Richard Leacock's and Joyce Chopra's *A Happy Mother's Day* (1963), and D. A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967). These are films that are all but obligatory for any course surveying the documentary tradition, films I have been thinking about and teaching for many years, films I am continually rediscovering through my students' responses as well as my own.

The critical readings that comprise this book are meant to guide readers through the cinematic "texts" of these classic documentaries – sequence by sequence, sometimes shot by shot – in a way that leads to a fuller appreciation both of their historical significance and their aspirations and achievements *as films*. In the spirit of my earlier books, *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze* and *The "I" of the Camera*, these readings, individually and together, also sustain philosophical investigations of a number of interrelated issues and themes.

Despite the inclusion of accomplished documentary filmmakers in so many university film faculties, the field of film study has only recently begun to show significant interest in documentaries.[1] Even now, there remains a striking dearth of serious critical studies of documentary films. The work of Frederick Wiseman, the subject of more than one excellent book-length critical study, has been the main exception to this pervasive neglect.[2] Wiseman's films clearly merit the thoughtful and sympathetic attention they have received. But there are many documentary filmmakers whose work is capable of rewarding serious criticism.

In part, the scarcity of critical studies of documentary films is indicative of film study's general neglect of criticism, a consequence of the revolution undergone in the past two decades by a field that has come to accord precedence to what it calls "theory" and (more recently) what it calls "historiography." There has been a special animus, though, in film study's resistance to devoting sympathetic critical attention even to the most significant works within the documentary tradition. It derives from the claim sometimes made

on behalf of documentary films – less often by their makers or admirers than by detractors who invoke the claim only with the intention of repudiating it – that documentaries are capable of directly "capturing" reality. From the standpoint of the dominant contemporary film theories, which take "reality" to be an illusory ideological construct, such a claim seems intolerably naive or disingenuous.

Within contemporary film study, it is generally supposed that there is a clear distinction to be drawn between the American films discussed in this book (*Nanook of the North*, *A Happy Mother's Day*, *Don't Look Back*), which are presumed guilty of making the naive claim that they capture reality directly, and the European films (*Land without Bread, Night and Fog, Chronicle of a Summer*), which are taken to be far more sophisticated about philosophical issues of reality and representation, and hence exonerated. *Land without Bread*, for example, tends to be viewed – and taught – as if it were a mock documentary, not really a documentary at all; *Night and Fog* as a demonstration that the medium of film is not capable of representing the true dimension of the death camps; and *Chronicle of a Summer* as employing a wide range of sophisticated strategies to deny that the new method of filming it exemplifies (which Rouch, echoing Vertov, dubbed "cinéma-vérité") is a direct and truthful way to "document" the world as it is.

Within contemporary film study, these European films are viewed as if they simply repudiated documentary's traditional aspiration of revealing reality, as if they were antidocumentaries, in effect. As the readings in this book demonstrate, however, although *Land without Bread, Night and Fog* and *Chronicle of a Summer* are, indeed, sophisticated critiques of documentary modes of representation in film, they are also major achievements *as documentaries*. They do not deny the possibility of revealing reality in the medium of film; they achieve such revelations even as they reflect on the conditions that make their revelations possible.

As these readings also demonstrate, such classic American cinéma-vérité documentaries as *A Happy Mother's Day* and *Don't Look Back* – I find the distinction between "cinéma-vérité" and "direct cinema" prejudicial and unhelpful, and have no qualms about applying the term "cinéma-vérité" to the films of Leacock and Pennebaker as well as those of Rouch – likewise achieve revelations of reality and at the same time reflect seriously on the conditions of the film medium that make their revelations possible. To a surprising degree, this is true, as well, of their famous progenitor *Nanook of the North*. These American films address the same philosophical issues of reality and representation as their European cousins, and do so in ways that are no less sophisticated, philosophically. Indeed, all the films I address are revealed, in the readings that follow, as bearing far more intimate relationships to one another – as having far more in common, philosophically – than has ever been suggested.

When I proposed to Cambridge University Press a book of readings of

classic documentaries, I envisioned writing twice as many chapters as the present volume contains. There were to be readings of all the films that are, in fact, included, and also chapters on Lumière and "primitive" cinema; on Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*; on Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* and Humphrey Jennings's *Listen to Britain*; on Frederick Wiseman's *High School*; on Edward Pincus's *Diaries: 1971–1976*; on Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March*; and on Errol Morris's *Thin Blue Line*. I kept wishing to add more titles (one of Trinh Minh-ha's films, for example), for I was well aware how problematic it is for any small handful of works to stand in for the vast diversity of films we call "documentaries." Not until I was well along in the writing of this book did its eventual trajectory begin to reveal itself to me. And not until I was well along in the writing of the last chapter was I certain that this *was* the last chapter, that from my readings of an even smaller handful of works than I had anticipated addressing a book had emerged that was coherent and complete unto itself, a book that accomplished what I had set out to accomplish – and more.

When I sat down to write this book, I did not anticipate that it would culminate, intellectually and dramatically, in such an extended reading of Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*, or conclude so festively with an account of the ending of *Monterey Pop*. I had no idea that half the book's chapters – fully two-thirds of its pages – would be devoted to the historical moment represented by the first generation of cinéma-vérité filmmakers (Rouch, Leacock, Pennebaker). In thinking about documentary film over the years, I had devoted little attention to Leacock and Pennebaker, practitioners of a strict cinéma-vérité discipline that requires them to wait silently, from their place behind the camera, for other people – the camera's subjects – to reveal themselves. I had focused more on the younger generation of American filmmakers (among them Edward Pincus and his students – they were also Leacock's students – at the M.I.T. Film Section) who, in the spirit of the counterculture that emerged in the late sixties, undertook in the seventies and eighties to effect what they understood to be a radical, liberating break with that discipline.

The aspiration of Pincus's monumental *Diaries: 1971–1976*, for example, was to film the world without withdrawing from the world, to overcome or transcend the inhuman aspect of the cinéma-vérité filmmaker's role by filming his own everyday life and thereby transforming filming into an everyday activity. To this end, Pincus felt he had to be revealed, to reveal himself, in his acts of filming in ways not allowed by the discipline practiced by the first generation of American cinéma-vérité filmmakers. He felt he had to free himself, when filming, to speak and be spoken to and even on occasion to step in front of the camera, to let others film him. Yet in *Diaries*, a conflict emerges between the filmmaker's project, which only Pincus can call his own, and the demands of others (wife, children, parents, lovers, friends, fellow teachers, students) who call upon him to acknowledge them as human beings separate from him – and from his film.

Diaries concludes, symbolically, on the eve of Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement (ironically, it is also the first day of the Vermont hunting season; in the distance, we hear gunfire). Yom Kippur is the day of all days to remember that no human being writes the book of his or her own life, and to atone for having forgotten this. Warning his son not to knock it over, Pincus lays his camera on the ground. It continues to roll as his wife, Jane, trims his almost hippie-length hair. We sense a possibility of renewal – but only if the filmmaker stops filming his life, abandons his project or, perhaps, acknowledges that his filming has been completed, has arrived at the possibility of a new beginning. On film, he has a melancholy air, as if he believes in his heart that he has failed in his aspiration to overcome or transcend the inhuman aspect of filming. Yet a final judgment is not his to make.

In the films of Pincus's gifted students (among them Steve Ascher, Joel DeMott, Jeff Kreines, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss, Mark Rance, and Ann Schaetzel), too, the aspiration is to overcome or transcend the inhuman aspect of the filmmaker's role by filming the world without withdrawing from the world. And in these films, too, there are central conflicts between filming one's life and living it in a fully human way.

Ross McElwee's grand epic *Sherman's March* and its sequel *Time Indefinite* are one culmination, to date, of the work of Pincus's students. From start to finish, *Diaries* takes the filmmaker and his project utterly seriously; editing his film, Pincus never explicitly distances himself from his former self behind (sometimes in front of) the camera, never claims he has changed since he put his camera down, that he has become Other to his filmed and filming self. McElwee's films, begun a full decade after Pincus shot *Diaries*, assert an ironic perspective on its filmmaker's project – a perspective the films reveal their maker to have lacked when living and filming the events the films enable us to view.

In their ironic perspective, McElwee's films are strikingly reminiscent of Leacock's *A Happy Mother's Day*. The conditions of the act of filming are not fundamentally altered, *Sherman's March* and *Time Indefinite* declare, even if the filmmaker breaks his or her silence behind the camera; even if people directly address the filmmaker in the act of filming; and even if the camera is pointed at the filmmaker who becomes an on-screen presence on a par with the camera's other subjects.

It is only in the course of writing this book that I have come fully to recognize the magnitude of the continuity between the first and second generations (and between the second and third generations) of American cinéma-vérité filmmakers, the centrality and depth of the acknowledgment of the filmmaker's role in films such as *A Happy Mother's Day*, *Don't Look Back*, and even *Nanook of the North*. It is a central concern of films like *Diaries*, *Sherman's March*, and *Time Indefinite* to acknowledge and thereby overcome or transcend the withdrawal from the world, the withdrawal of the world, that is a condition of the world's appearing on film at all. It turns

out that this is a central concern of their American predecessors, too, as it is of Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread*, Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*, and Jean Rouch's (and Edgar Morin's) *Chronicle of a Summer*, the European films that *Documentary Film Classics* addresses at length.

Not coincidentally, all these films, as they emerge in these readings, share a common overall form or trajectory, a trajectory that (also not coincidentally) turns out to be shared by my writing as well (by each of the following readings, and by the book as a whole). All of these films assume the form of a literal and/or mythical journey in which the camera penetrates deeper and deeper into an ostensibly alien region. Upon penetrating to the heart of this region, at once a geographical and spiritual "place," each film simply ends, in every case without envisioning a way back, as if to imply that there is no world outside this region, no reality outside the world on film.

There is no particular feature or set of features that distinguishes the world on film from the real world, and yet the world projected on the movie screen does not exist (now). As Stanley Cavell has observed, the role reality plays in movies makes the world on film a moving image of skepticism, but the possibility of skepticism is internal to the conditions of human knowledge. That we cannot know reality with absolute certainty is a fact about human knowledge, a fact about what, for human beings, knowledge and reality *are*. It does not follow from this fact that in reality there are no truths about the world, or about ourselves, that we are capable of knowing, or acknowledging.

André Bazin believed it was the wish for the world re-created in its own image that gave rise to the emergence of film in the late nineteenth century, hence that, starting with Lumière, a realist strand runs the length of the fabric of film history. In *The World Viewed*, Cavell gave Bazin's idea a crucial dialectical twist by reflecting on the fact that it is precisely because the medium's material basis is the projection of reality that film is capable of rendering the fantastic as readily as the realistic. Reality plays an essential role in all films, no more so in the ones Bazin privileged as "realist" or even the ones we call "documentaries." But in no film is the role reality plays simply that of being recorded or documented. The medium transforms or transfigures reality when the world is revealed, reveals itself, on film. And reality itself, in our experience, is already stamped by our fantasies.

Documentaries are not inherently more direct or truthful than other kinds of films. But from this fact it does not follow that documentaries are too naive to take seriously unless they repudiate the aspiration of revealing reality. What particular documentary films reveal about reality, how they achieve their revelations, are questions to be addressed by acts of criticism, not settled a priori by theoretical fiat. What makes this principle especially pertinent is the fact that the documentaries addressed in this book, by virtue of their commitment to reality, challenge the theoretical frameworks that dominate contemporary film study, which thus may be said to have an interest in discrediting these films, an inherent bias against them. Then what crit-

ical approaches, what terms of criticism, do these works call for if their seriousness is to be taken seriously, if their revelations are to be acknowledged? How are we to acknowledge what separates what we call "documentaries" from what we call "fiction films" without denying what they have in common? (What they have in common, first and foremost, is the medium of film.)

If this book is to prove useful to the serious study of film, its usefulness must reside in its particular critical discoveries, which I hope readers will find fruitful. But the book's potential usefulness also resides in the critical approach it aspires to exemplify. My writing aspires to exemplify the value – all but forgotten in contemporary film study – of criticism that is rooted in experience and expressed in ordinary language, in words we hold in common, words capable of enabling us to achieve a perspective from which a clear understanding can be reached.

In accepting this double obligation, my writing is inspired and guided by the work of Stanley Cavell, who in turn relies on philosophical procedures associated with the names of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. An analytical philosopher proceeds by abstract analysis or by defining technical terms to be given special uses. Cavell proceeds by appealing philosophically to what we ordinarily say and mean, by relying on the precision and clarity of ordinary words in their appropriate contexts. Self-knowledge is a paradigm of the kind of knowledge Cavell's philosophical procedures are designed to pursue. Without knowing oneself, one cannot know what self-knowledge is. And without knowing – that is, acknowledging – our own experience of film, we cannot know the roles films play in our lives, we cannot know the reality of the world on film, we cannot know what films are.

In writing *Documentary Film Classics*, my goal is to give voice to my experience of these particular films – to find a way of saying, in my own words, what my experience of these films has enabled me to know (about film, about the world, about myself) – and thereby to encourage readers to give voice to their experience, too. My writing continually turns in on itself, turns us to ourselves, aspires to make us mindful of who we have been, who we are, and who we are capable of becoming. In aspiring to remind us of the value of turning to our experience, the book aspires to remind us of the importance of expressing ourselves with conviction and passion and the equal importance of acknowledging one another's words. It aspires to remind us of the value of conversation.

When I was a doctoral student in the Harvard Philosophy Department in the late sixties, and when I returned to Harvard to teach film history, criticism, and theory from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, I reaped the rewards of conversations about their work with the many distinguished documentary filmmakers who lived in the Boston area. Apart from those conversations, this book would not have been mine to write. Robert Gardner and Alfred Guzzetti (and, later, Ross McElwee and Robb Moss) were valued colleagues at Harvard; Edward Pincus and Dusan Makavejev (whose

work straddles documentary and "fiction") were among those who taught at Harvard for a year or more; for several summers, Jean Rouch taught an intensive seminar on ethnographic film, which my wife, Kitty Morgan, coordinated; there was constant interaction between faculty and students at Harvard and at the M.I.T. Film Section (co-founded by Leacock and Pincus), then the world's foremost training ground for cinéma-vérité filmmakers; the Boston area was home to the world-class documentary filmmakers Frederick Wiseman and John Marshall; and there were more gifted students than it is possible for me to name here who found themselves inspired to venture out with cameras on their shoulders to embark on the adventure of filming the one existing world.

Nor would this book have been mine to write apart from conversations over the years with nonfilmmaker friends, colleagues, and students who share a love of film and a belief in the importance of finding our own words, words we can stand behind, to account for the value of our experience of movies. Along with my wife, Kitty, the closest of these intellectual companions have been Stanley Cavell and Marian Keane. All of their comments on drafts of these chapters have been, as always, immeasurably fruitful.

I am also deeply indebted to a number of other readers whose responses to portions of this manuscript have proved invaluable to me. These include (in alphabetical order) Gus Blaisdell, Alan Cholodenko, Barry Grant, Jay Hollenbach, Ira Jaffe, Michael Lydon, Ellen Mandel, Gilberto Perez, Charles Warren, and David Woods.

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Documentary Film Classics